



## CultureWork: Current Issue

[Home](#) / [Research & Publications](#) / [CultureWork](#) / [Current Issue](#)

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### Folkvine.org: The Challenges of Presenting Folk Art On-line. An Overview

*by Kristin G. Congdon*

Director, Heritage Alliance

Professor of Film and Philosophy

In the summer of 2003, Craig Saper and I wrote a grant to the Florida Humanities Council to develop a website on Florida folk artists. We sought to portray these artists and their communities in a way that they would choose to represent themselves if they were web designers. Recognizing that this project would take a team of people with a variety of skills, we looked for experts in ethnography, folklore, art, videography, sound, web-design, animation, computer science, and administration. We also ended up needing people who could cook and set up stages, chairs, and laptops. Overlaying all of these requirements was a desire to have individuals who knew how to collaborate, raise interesting questions, and offer constructive criticism of the group's work. To add to our university team, we needed Florida artists willing to work with us and communities that would be responsive to the project. We identified our artists, constructed a plan, and once the grant was funded, we pulled our team together.



In this on-going project our goals are: 1) to collaboratively meld the many needed skills together to produce a project where we communicate the values and content material important to an artist and his/her community; 2) to effectively present the material in the aesthetic of the artist (and his/her community when appropriate), and; 3) to raise questions concerning online folklore and humanities scholarship as we moved through the process.



Our four selected artists are Ruby Williams, who paints signs for her produce stand in the historic and rural African American town of Bealsville; Ginger

LaVoie, who although non-Polynesian by birth, became culturally Polynesian when she spent almost three decades learning traditional quilt making from Hawaiian elders; the Scott Family (Wayne, Marty, and Alan) who make customized clown shoes and clown props for the circus community; and Diamond Jim Parker, a retired circus clown and circus historian, who made miniature model circuses. Sadly, Diamond Jim passed away during the work on this project.

As art education has become less text-based and more oriented toward images (Freedman, 2000), this project attempts to orient itself in this way. As we focus on the communication of images, we also identify tradition as an important element in each of our artist's lives and work. We defined tradition as a temporal concept, one that is inherently tangled with the past and the future (Glassie, 1995).

Horgan's (2002) claim that "Art, the lie that tells the truth, is intrinsically ironic . . . [and] it helps us get to another level and then falls away" (p. B8) assisted us in portraying our selected artists' abilities to tell the truth. As a conduit for that truth, we hope that we can present their truths to a wider audience so that we all have an opportunity to move to another level of understanding. We don't claim to have fully succeeded; we only claim to have begun the journey. Our challenges are many.

## Questions Concerning Technology: Kit-Bashing

*by Craig Saper*  
Professor of English



Media technology never exists as a neutral conduit. Using print or the internet changes not only the accessibility and presentation, but also the meanings and types of messages.

Folkvine uses new media technologies to change anthropological and folklore scholarship. The project accounts for the possibilities and potential of new media formats. The portal for that scholarship and conservation can now serve to encourage folk communities to expand beyond their geographic boundaries.

Just as conceptual artists have turned again to folk art as a model for their own work in for example Margaret Kilgallen's installations like *To Friend or Foe* (1999) that appropriates carnival signage, the Folkvine group sought to use the works studied not simply as objects to analyze or promote, but as models for scholarship. No one to date has used what is even on the periphery of art and folk art as a model of scholarship. This allows for a reciprocal relationship with the cultural works.

Note the entrance to Ruby C. Williams' site via a vegetable stand (rather than through the typical flat design of scholarly presentations); viscerally experience the sounds on the Scott's and Diamond Jim Parker's sites about artisanal crafts associated with old-time circuses; listen to the stories about smoothing and caressing quilts as a crucial part of the Hawaiian quilting tradition.

Kit-bashing is a term learned from Diamond Jim Parker and borrowed as a way to consider the way we would use media technology in this project. The kit-basher takes a toy train kit, and breaks the pieces in order to change the characters to fit the needs of the circus he is building. For our project, the kit was the design of websites especially for cultural scholarship. The bashing was using folk art as a model for design - changing both the meaning and uses of scholarship and folk art. In short, the kit-bashing model of technology changes the relationship between observers and observed. It also changes the function of the folk art: no longer examples of an innocent past, but models of a potential future.



## Challenges Related to Aesthetics and Accessibility

*by Chantale Fontaine*  
Folkvine.org Web Developer



Folkvine's main goal is to create artists' websites as if they were conceptual extensions of his or her artwork both visually and organizationally. To do this, we attempted to act as channels through which the artist, if in possession of our technical skills, would have created the website. This process of channeling began with our immersion into the artists' communities, lives, and artworks. We visited the artists' workspaces and participated in community events. We collected images, video, and data about history, lives, and cultures, and we viewed and discussed as much artwork as was available. Finally, with pages of possibilities sketched, we commenced the actuation of the site, making methodical use of our videographic, photographic, and textual documentation to create a virtual environment conveying the aesthetics of the artists chosen.

Consequently, Ruby Williams' spontaneity provided us with our first challenge as we addressed her improvisational approach. We discussed which painting should go where and how it may look better if tilted more to the left more than to the right. Truly "letting the mouse do the work" in Adobe Photoshop and never using a template to lay out a new page in Macromedia Dreamweaver, the final visual design reflects the essence of her Bealsville environment by sharing the content and context of her work in her playful and impulsive style. Conversely, we found in the preparation and symmetry of Ginger LaVoie's quilt designs a prominent order, so we carefully preplanned her site as a continuous design. Transmitting the tactility of LaVoie's work, we invite the viewer to mimic her smoothing and caressing motions over a virtual quilt to uncover hidden links. On Diamond Jim Parker's site, we surprise the visitor with a full virtual miniature circus, complete with sound and animation, and then we call on the user to further to uncover Parker's obsession with circus history and his unique kit-bashing aesthetic, while tossing fun and laughter into the mix. Funny sounds and bright animation fill the Scott Family's site, in which interactivity is key to exploring clown shoemaking. We invite the user to quickly create a clown shoe and provide commentary and video exploring the actual process.



With the advent of hypermedia and the popularization of the Web, designers often use sound, animation, and interactivity at the sacrifice of usability.



However, "technology can't create value on the Web without content; and good content is harder to create than to distribute" (Belle, 2001). In our case, we already had a wealth of great content, but choosing the best way to represent an artist virtually, while adhering to the artist's aesthetic awareness, offered an inimitable challenge. One danger is the possible over-application of the presentation technologies available to us, like Macromedia Flash or Windows Media Player, requiring the user to download and install a plugin for the browser. For many casual computer users that task may prove confusing at best, complicating the usability of the site and thus diminishing the user experience.



Hypermedia differs and succeeds in its allowance for users' free choice in the navigation of content through multiple links. When testing the sites, not only did we ask ourselves and members of the communities involved, "Is this particular element representative of the artist?" but also, "Is the navigation to and from the element natural?" We uncovered many of these obstacles at the community events that included wide-ranging audiences who explored and commented on the sites in progress. A vital part of the development lifecycle, testing, fixing, and retesting, continues until we clearly hear the artists' voices.

## Collaborative Challenges

*by Alex Katsaros*

Folkvine.org Technical Coordinator

Our endeavor to weave folklore into the World Wide Web relied heavily on fostering a collaborative environment, not only within our team, but also and perhaps more importantly, with our featured artists and their respective communities.



Aside from requesting personal photographs and stories relevant to the featured artists, we also solicited their appraisal of our web design and content choices. We had four public viewings, one for each artist, mid-way through the development of each site. At all four events, we sought constructive criticism in the midst of the appreciative praise that personal friends and family members had for the web sites. Sometimes the online medium itself left the communities awe-struck and it took some coaxing to get suggestions for changes. Nevertheless, we managed to collect useful feedback using survey forms and made improvements to the sites accordingly.

When it came to direct collaboration with our featured artists, many of our teammates became participant-observers, and tried their hands at the art forms we studied. Without this deeper "channeling" that Chantale Fontaine describes in her essay, the materials we gathered (such as still images, video interviews, and ancillary documents such as newspaper clippings) would not have sufficiently delivered the aesthetic we aimed to convey as we composed each web site. Having us channel their aesthetic was not an obscure notion to our participant-artists, especially for Ruby Williams, the "minister artist," who channels her own divine inspiration through her painting.



As we continued our work on Folkvine, I began to wonder: have we created a work-of-culture, or have we merely worked-over a culture? My phrase, "worked-over culture," suggests an exploitative relationship rather than a collaborative one. I am certain, however, that the artists became our friends and spiritual guides as we worked together, and they trusted us with their art and life stories. Beyond meeting the challenge to avoid exploitation, we also struggled to form the collaboration among artists and technologies available. In other words, we explored technologies needed to portray the essence of each artist's message, strength of character, and vision of the world. Cameras were useful, and occasionally we handed one to the artists themselves -- but when placing any footage in the context of Folkvine, we knew that *seeing as* the artist truly required a loyalty to their overall aesthetic.

In summary, Folkvine serves as a collaborative performance of folklore research and exhibition. As our team has strived faithfully to play our role with our artist friends and their communities, we also realize that we constitute an interpretive community of our own--subject to the pitfalls of representing others. By facing these challenges, I take away lessons about texts and technologies. When viewers arrive at the site, they will sense these elements at play. And if we did our job well, the *context* (i.e. the tactile, gestural, and so forth) also will rise to meet them somewhere between their monitor and imagination.



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Ruby Williams

## References

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Florida's Art and Artists on the Web



[Read and watch](#) Folkvine Group's presentation at New York's School of Visual Arts Eighteenth Annual National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists.  
The theme for 2004's conference was "Art and Story."

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